

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

www.ijellh.com

Mr. Ningombam Sanjay Singh

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Delhi

Delhi

sanjaysinghningombam@gmail.com

Clothing and Attire: Identity of Manipuri Muslims in *Abir Khan* (2010)

Abstract

The Manipuri Muslims are one of the important ethnic groups which have been living in Manipur for more than four hundred years. They share the same language and cultures with the Meiteis, the dominant ethnic group, though both of them practice different religions. With the flourishing of digital Manipuri films, Muslim characters have appeared in the films that are made by the Meiteis who are mostly Hindu by faiths and practices. The visual representation of the Muslim characters in the films emphasizes their religious pan Muslim identity though the Manipuri Muslims are unique from other Muslims, whereas the distinct ethnic identity of the Meitei-Hindu is maintained in the film. The Film Forum Manipur regulates all films on “the lines of Manipuri culture”. Any film which is not ‘Manipuri culture’ enough is not allowed to screen in any theatre and public place. Such restriction, in particular the dress and attire, is not applied in the representation of the Manipuri Muslim. Hence, a discourse of ‘othering’ is formed through the visual representation of the two ethnic groups. This paper aims to examine the clothing and attire of the Manipuri Muslim in a select film.

Keywords: Manipuri Muslim, Digital Manipuri film, Clothing and Attire and Stereotypes

Identity is a condition to differentiate oneself from others. Several aspects, such as nationality, religion, gender, language, lifestyle and clothing and attires form an identity of an individual or ethnic group. Considering the complexity of defining the concept of identity, in 2001, a team of sociologists identified ten factors known as “identity markers” that attribute the formation of one’s identity, such as “place of birth, ancestry, place of residence, length of residence, upbringing and education, name, accent, physical appearance, dress and commitment to place” (Kiely et.al 36, cited in Kabir 23). Several social circumstances shape the identity of an ethnic group. Hence, the identity is not fixed and unidimensional rather it is a fluid. Certain aspects are excluded in the formation of an identity of an ethnic group to place something or someone in a particular category. However, categorizations are neither “random” nor “archetypal” and there is not a “universal black box” that generates the categories of difference (Gilman 20). The images (identities) are the results of the historical and cultural factors that perpetuate these images. This paper aims to examine the representation of clothing and attire of *Pangal* (Manipuri Muslim) in the Manipuri film, *Abir Khan* (2010) directed by Philu H.

The Manipuri Muslims are known as “Pangal”, a word derives from “Bangal” meant to refer “men of East Bengal” (now Bangladesh) (Irene 22, Singh 1-5). They came to Manipur in 1606 A.D. as prisoners of war during the reign of Meitei King Khagemba and they settled in Imphal by taking the Meitei women as their wives (Irene 9). Their non-elitist background and interracial matrimonial alliance with the Meitei women compelled them to completely assimilate to Manipuri society though they were Muslims by faith. They even adopted Manipuri as their mother tongue. Considering the lineage they share with the Meitei, the *Pangals* (Manipuri Muslims) are officially classified as “Meitei-Pangal” in the state gazette of 1993. Both the Manipuri Muslims and the Meiteis (the majority of them are

Hindus) had no enmity and they had together fought against any social issue. In recent decades, they have also come together against the demands of the Naga nationalists who are aiming for a greater Nagaland by integrating all Naga inhabitant areas of Manipur. However, such social harmony received a blow in 1993 when there was Meitei-Manipuri Muslim communal riot (Rahman 1-2). Both the communities feel that the riot was started due to “a simple mistake” killing 140 people and injuring 25 people (*The Imphal Free Press* 2015).

Clothing and Attire of Manipuri Muslims in *Abir Khan* (2010)

Banning of the screening of Bollywood films in the year 2000 by some insurgent group is considered as a blessing in disguise for Manipuri filmmakers and lovers. Coincidentally, the year 1999 also witnessed the emergence of the new technology named digital intermediate of making a film. George Lucas’s *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* was released in June 1999 in the US with digital projection (Belton 285). Unlike the celluloid filmmaking, with the help of the new technology, digital filmmaking becomes cheaper, faster and easier. As a result, more 40-50 films are produced annually in Manipur whereas only one feature film could be made before the advent of the new technology (Sunil and Sharma 2012, Kongbam 10). As the filmmaking becomes accessible to anyone, the films are made by various people who have not even learned the art of film making. At the same time, digital Manipuri films become a medium for expressing any issue. Among the several issues, showing the cultural milieu of various ethnic groups has become a recurring theme. One such film is *Abir Khan* which shows Manipuri Muslim as prominent protagonists.

Unlike other films, for an instance *Thokkidagi Kishi*ⁱ, *Ayengba Leinam*ⁱⁱ and *Good Bye! Nazma*ⁱⁱⁱ, which shows Muslims in comical and cameo roles, *Abir Khan* (2010) is one of the few films that have Muslim-characters in prominent roles. The film suggests that the new generation should write a new chapter of love and social harmony among different ethnics in

the history of Manipuri society: “*anouba eetihas anouba chenasing*” (let’s write a new history on the new pages). This film can be considered as the Manipuri film version of the popular Hindi Film, *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) which shows different faiths—Hinduism, Islam and Christianity— through the characterization of the main protagonists. As this paper aims to examine the visual representation of Muslim-characters, its primary concern is to analysis the clothing and attire of Muslim ethnic group.

Clothing and attire of a character reveal the emotional and intellectual make-up of a character. Unlike other literary texts, such as novel or form of writings, the film shows "an action, identity, temperament" of the characters rather than telling it to the audience (Gaudreault and Jost 45). One’s identity and dress are linked and “clothes display, express and shape identity...” (Twigg 2009). Considering that the attire of the characters shows and shapes their identities, the filmmakers are very particular with the dress the character wears. The Film Forum of Manipur, a censorship board, regulates the films “on the lines of Manipuri culture” before they are sent to the regional Indian Censor Board in Guwahati. Any cultural form which is not “on the lines of Manipuri culture” is ostracized. Several items, such as *saree*, *bindi*, mini skirt and *kurta pajama* or anything that is associated with ‘mainland Indian’ are banned in Manipuri films (Nithya 2013).

Regarding the clothing and attire, Muslim characters in the film can be easily recognized from the clothing they wear and the distinctive attire of the characters reveal the ethnic identities they belong to. Muslim characters wear *Salwar-Kameez*, *fanek*^{iv}, *Kurta-Pajamas*, *skull caps*, etc., Amina, one of the female leading protagonists of the film, wears several stylish *salwar-kameezes* both in and outside the house. Her mother, however, wears only *fanek* and *khudei*^v. Abir Khan and other Muslim male characters are identified with the skull caps, *kurta-pajamas*, *shemagh* (a headscarf popular in many Arab nations) and other

headgears. Muslim characters even in other films, such as *Thokkidagi Kish*, *Ayengba Leinam*, and *Good Bye! Nazma*, are identified with their attires and clothing.

Feroja Syed states that there was no difference in clothing between the early Manipuri Muslims and the Meiteis though they professed different faiths. The early Muslims assimilated and acculturated into the cultural practices of the indigenous Meitei ethnic group without any resistance (35). Several movements, such as Wahhabi, Deoband, Ahl-i-Hadis, Tabliqi Jamaat, and Jamaat-i-Islami, happening worldwide at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, however, transformed the Muslim identity (Robinson 106-07). For the first time in the history of Manipuri Muslims, *ulemas* or *maulvis* introduced “the Islamic dress code, manners and etiquettes and life styles” (Syed 49). ‘Lungi’ a popular form of male dress is said to be introduced by Muhammad Hafiz Ali in Manipur. The pattern of dressing among the women became significant changes; instead of a short blouse, a longer kurta reaching the knees and below for the upper body was in vogue and ‘*fanek*’ a dress that reaches the ankle and primarily worn by the Meitei women was still used by the Muslim women. The *kurta-pyjama*, *salwar-kameez*, *kisti cap* and *zuba* which are widely used by Muslims in other parts of the country and world became the standard dress code for the Manipuri Muslim men. Keeping beard also became a trend among the men (49-50). However, according to Rajiya Shahani’s *Ph.D. Dissertation*, the dresses of contemporary Manipuri Muslims can be divided into Islamic, traditional and modern. The dress-style of Manipuri Muslims and other ethnic communities is very similar and the dress of the Manipuri Muslims is heavily influenced by the Meities’s. She also emphasized that due to the influence of modern fashion and westernization, the dress of the Meities and the Manipuri Muslims are hardly different from each other (100).

Referring to the representation of clothing, this paper does not intend to prove that the stereotypes on the clothing of Manipuri Muslims contradict the realities. Such effort of

finding correspondences and non-correspondences may end up in believing that cinematic stereotypes directly reflect the social reality in terms of resemblance and analogy. Rather it intends to emphasize the manner the stereotypes on clothing mystify the social reality of Manipuri Muslims in disguised ways under historical circumstances since stereotypes are neither "random" nor "archetypal" and there is not a "universal black box" that generates the categories of difference (Gilman 20). The attires (images) are the results of the historical and cultural factors that perpetuate these images. Out of the several images, one selects an image that best reflects the common presuppositions about the Other at a particular moment in a certain historical period. Selecting a particular image out of several is "partly a result of actions by the corresponding real entities" (21). From the above, it is learned that clothing of Manipuri Muslims is broadly divided into Islamic (religious), traditional and modern. In religious gathering, most women prefer *salwar-kameez* to *fanek*, and men prefer *kurta-pajama*, *salwar-kameez*, *kisti cap* and *zuba* to any other form of clothing. Considering religious rituals and ceremonies associated, representation of Muslim characters with these attires suggests that the Manipuri Muslims are religious. It also implies that their religious and pan-Indian or global Muslim identities are more serious than the modern outlook. Selecting religious clothing out of several forms of attires suggest 'bigotry' of the Manipuri Muslims. Speaking at the launch of book, *Of Saffron Flags and Skullcaps: Hindutva, Muslim Identity and the Idea of Writing* by Ziya Us Salam, the former Vice President of India, Hamid Ansari said that considering skullcap as the synonymous of one's (Muslim) identity is "perhaps a reflection of bigotry" (Arshad 2018). In the film, young Muslims wearing skullcaps can be observed even in public places. Abir Khan, the protagonist, often wears skull caps and other attires to show his religious identity wherever he goes. For instance, Abir Khan wears *shemagh* (a headscarf popular in many Arab nations), that has become synonymous for Muslim identity in several places. By showing the Muslim characters in *salwar-kameez*, skull

caps and *kurta pajamas* reciting verses from the Koran and offering prayers in the mosque, the film might intend to draw an imaginary division of "us" and "them". Showing of Abir Khan reciting verses from the Koran, and going together with Muslim brethren in skull caps, *kurta pajamas*, and headgears emphasize the differences between the Manipuri Muslims and the Meitei-Hindus. The Meitei-Hindus and the Tribal-Christians are never shown worshipping in temple and church. If Bir Singh's religion is considered, he should have been shown wearing *dhoti* and other ritual marks to differentiate his religious identity from the rest of the character instead of 'westernized and modern attires' (trousers and shirts). The "us" (the Meitei-Hindu) as modern and non-religious and "them" (the Manipuri Muslim) as traditional and religious binaries can be seen from the film considering the fact that almost all the Meiteis of Manipur identify themselves as "Hindus" and this identity is supported by the various forms of rituals and ceremonies performed right from the birth of a child to the dead. Abir Singh in the film is also very much a Hindu yet he never wears 'religious' Meitei-Hindu attires in the film. By highlighting the 'Islamic' cultural forms, the Manipuri Muslims become "Other" to the 'privileged' Meitei-Hindu.

By referring to Pakistani Muslims, Maleeha Aslam observes that in the post-colonial counties, globalization and liberation of the market have impacted Muslim societies; "ultra-conservatism", "fundamentalism" and "orthodoxy" in the areas of religion emerged. That section of the society who could go along with the Western ideologies became useful and those who were left out within that framework became a "threat" to society. Majority of the population became more isolated and marginalized in society. This paved a way for the society to become conservative in their faiths as the people feel hopeless and useless; they take solace in the Divine power. Growing beard and wearing skullcap become a norm "to assign some value to himself by becoming very religious so that people respect them" (143). Saudi Wahhabi appearance, which emphasizes of sporting beards, skullcaps, traditional

attires for men and *abaya* (a long cloak) and *niquaab*, becomes a more standardized form of clothing for Muslim society (ibid...). Apart from considering these Muslim symbols as a tool for counter-narratives against the Westernization and globalization, it can be read that Abir Khan, Amina and other Muslim characters' 'Muslim attires' signify the orthodoxy in religion and a sense of 'hopeless' and 'useless' in the modern society unlike the Meitei-Hindus who appear to have the capability to go along with the Western ideologies. As per the Film Forum Manipur, clothing and attires of the characters in the film should be "on the lines of Manipuri culture". The 'Manipuri culture', according to the Forum, appears synonymous of the Meitei culture. However, defining 'the Meitie culture' becomes a complex paradigm. Based on the faiths and practices, the Meiteis can be divided as Meitei-Hindu, Meitei-Brahmin, Meitei-Christian, Meitei-Sanamahist and Meitei-Pangal. Showing of the Manipuri Muslims in attires which are not approved by the Forum in the film implies that they are 'outsiders' to the "Manipuri culture" though they have been a part of Manipuri society for more than four hundred years.

Endnotes

ⁱ In the cameo role, a Muslim husband along with his two wives is shown quarrelling in a quarter of a private school. From the clothing and attire of these women, they can be easily identified as Manipuri Muslims.

ⁱⁱ The attire of the Muslim characters shows their identities.

ⁱⁱⁱ This film shows the unrequited love of a Meitei boy for a Muslim girl. The Muslim identity in the film is shown with the attire they wear. Skullcaps, pajamas and headgears are richly shown in the film.

^{iv} This is a kind of female dress worn by both the Meiteis and the Pangals that reaches up to the ankles.

^v It is a piece of cloth used for covering the head and the upper part of the body.

Works Cited

- “Muslim body seeks compensation for 1993 Meitei-Meitei Pangal riot victims”. *The Imphal Free Press*. 12 January 2015. Imphal Free Press. Web. 14 January 2019.
- Abir Khan. Dir. H.Philu. Perf. Bala, Gokhul, Hemabati, Kamala, Sadananda, Sori, and Surjit. Philu Film Productions, 2010.DVD.
- Arshad. “Using headgear to signify identity could be bigotry: Ansari”. *The Siasat Daily*. 10 July 2018. Siasat.com. Web. 20 January 2019.
- Aslam, Maleeha. “Islamism and Masculinity: Case Study Pakistan.” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 39, no. 3 (149), 2014, pp. 135–149. *JSTOR*. Web. 31 January 2019.
- Ayengba Leinam.Dir. Prakash. Perf. Kaiku , Dinesh , Janeman , James Angom , Ranjana , Baby, Lalit , Diya , Prakash , Sanou , Sima , Benu. A Laishram Prakash Films, 2008. *YouTube*. Web. 25 November 2018.
- Belton, John. “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution”. *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*. Ed. Marc Furstenau. Routledge: London, 2010. Print.
- Gaudreault, Andre and Francois Jost. “Enunciation and Narration”. *A Companion to Film Theory*. Eds.Toby Miller and Robert Stam. USA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999. Print
- Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985. Web.
- Good Bye! Nazma*. Dir. Shashikumar. Perf. Bony, Universe, Bala Tensubam. C.R.Movies Entertainment, 2010? DVD.
- Irene, Salam. *The Muslims of Manipur*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2010. Google Books. Web. 18 October 2018.
- Kabir, Nahid Afrose. “Identity Matters.” *Young American Muslims: Dynamics of Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. pp. 11–41. *JSTOR*.
- Kiely, Richard, et al. “The markers and rules of Scottish identity.” *Sociological Review* 49:1 (2001), pp. 33–55. Print.
- Kongbam, Meghachandra. ‘Manipur Cinema: Its Journey and Problems.’ *Souvenir: Celebration of 25 Years of Manipur Cinema 1972-1997*. Manipur Film Development Corporation Ltd., Imphal: 1997.Print.

-
- Nithya, R. "Culture of Censorship in Manipuri Cinema". *News Click*. 08 February 2013. Web. 09 October 2015.
- Rahman, A. "The Culture of Manipuri Muslim (Pangals) and Meitei Influences". *Manipur Amusung Meitei Pangal*. Compiled. Arambam Samarendra. Imphal: P.S. Printer, 1998. Web.
- Robinson, Francis. *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*. Delhi: OUP, 2000. Print.
- Shahani, Rajiya. *Social Structure of Meitei-Pangal (Muslims) of Manipur*. Diss. Aligarh Muslim University, 2006. Web. 10 October 2018.
- Singh, Moirangthem Chandra. *Manipuri Muslims da Meitei-Pangal*. Imphal, 1974. Web.
- Sunil, Oinam and K. Sarojkumar Sharma. "The movie moguls of Manipur". *The Times of India*. 23 June 2012. Web. 27 June 2014.
- Syed, Feroja. *Religion, Ethnic Identity and the State: Pangals In Manipur*. Diss. Jawaharlal University, 2007. Web. 4 November 2018.
- Thokkidagi Kishi*. Dir. Diya Khwairakpam. Perf. Kaiku, Abenao and others. G.S. Film Production, 2009. *YouTube*. Web. 12 October 2018.
- Twigg, Julia. "Clothing, Identity and the Embodiment of Age". *Aging and Identity: A Postmodern Dialogue*. Eds. J. Powell and T. Gilbert. New York: Nova Science Publisher, 2009. Web. 29 December 2018.